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April Dunham

TEACHING THE CULTURALLY DEPRIVED

#157

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In our swiftly changing society there are new terms emerging everyday. One such term is "culturally disadvantaged child." It has only been within the past few years that Americans have begun to recognize the urgency and complexity of the problem in educating disadvantaged children.

The designation of cultural deprivation should not be equated with any particular ethnic group, but should be defined in terms of characteristics of the individual and/or the characteristics of his environment. The disadvantaged child comes from a family with an annual income of less than \$3000. There exists a high level of unemployment forcing a reliance on welfare benefits. Housing and sanitary conditions are below standard; and living space is usually inadequate. The level of education is extremely low. An attitude of despondency is prevalent.

Substantial numbers of Americans have grown up in these isolated social pockets. They have not had the adequate preparation that would enable them to achieve within the traditional school system or to function optimally as a member of society. By 1970 one out of every two will be faced with this situation.¹

Cultural deprivation in the first five or six years of life can handicap a child's functioning in school. By the time he reaches age 13, he could very easily be three

or four years behind. This is why it is so important for the future of the child to effectively handle the situation now before it is too late or before he is too far behind.

A culturally disadvantaged child usually lacks the basic essentials of life. He often does not consume enough food to satisfy his nutritional needs. His clothing is inadequate, and he does not receive a sufficient amount of sleep, rest, or exercise. He receives a minimum amount of medical attention. This causes him to suffer from organ deficiencies such as loss of hearing and poor vision.

It is extremely difficult for a child to study in a home environment that is over-crowded, poorly ventilated and lighted, excessively noisy, and offers no privacy. "No child should be expected to learn under conditions likely to nullify the efforts of the teacher and school."²

Many times the culturally disadvantaged child has to obtain work outside the home to help supplement the income. He also will have numerous chores around the house. These things prevent him from participating in outside learning activities and social events.

A middle class child learns from his parents. He imitates what they say and do. It is more difficult for the culturally deprived child to imitate his parents. If both parents work, it may be hard for them to spend time with the child. Because of this poor interaction between parent and child, the child's language skills are deficient. He

has an inadequate model to imitate. Most of the time he hears only monosyllables, slang, and idioms. A child will imitate the poor grammar of his parents. If he hears slang and idioms, then this is what he will repeat.

The child's language is limited to concrete situations. He has a hard time understanding concepts in school because he has had no contact with them at home. When the child attends school, he cannot follow the language of the teacher. His auditory discrimination is poor, and his vocabulary is limited. The child, therefore, is unable to relate school experiences to his parents or home experiences to school.³

A culturally disadvantaged child will also lack science and math knowledge. He has little opportunity to observe natural phenomena. The middle class child learns by looking at pictures in Newspapers and magazines and by having books read to him. However, there is little reading material in a disadvantaged home. The deprived child will even lack the math knowledge that children learn from reading nursery rhymes. The television has also become a learning device, but the disadvantaged child is not usually fortunate enough to have access to one.

Another major handicap of the culturally deprived child is that he is lacking in basic experiences. He has probably never owned a box box of crayons or a coloring book. He has never had a set of paints or modeling clay. Since he does not possess many books and magazines, he will not know the stories that have become so familiar to most children.

He has had no contact with well-known characters or illustrations. As a result, he possesses a limited imagination.

The culturally deprived child probably has never visited a zoo. For this reason, he will not know animals ~~names~~, customs, and habitats. He seldom attends concerts or visits museums. He may not have ever attended a baseball game. When this child first goes to school, he may not know about mirrors, chairs, bathtubs, running water, or garbage disposals. It does not take long for the child to realize how much he lacks as compared to the other children. It is the school's ~~responsibility~~ responsibility to supply these experiences.

The culturally disadvantaged child needs pleasant experiences. Unpleasant ones will cause him to form negative attitudes toward himself, others, and life.

"Until different experiences comparable to those of other children in other more favorable areas are provided, little can be expected from growing children in substandard environments."⁴

"Often the culturally deprived child lives on the level of his basic psychological responses of love, anger, and sensual behavior."

At home he is expected and allowed to fight when he is angry. He learns that he must protect himself and not rely on the authorities. He perceives fear and worry at an early age. He hears continuous talk of unemployment, desertion, and adultery. This child will shout out answers in class to get attention, or he will refrain from talking at all because in other grades he has been so put down. It becomes the teachers responsibility to teach him to control his emotions.

Schools in deprived areas tend to be substandard. Many times there is no cafeteria. The books are outdated, and the equipment is old and used. These schools do not possess the newest teaching aids. This becomes a depressing situation for student and teacher. In general, it is not an atmosphere conducive to study.

Another discouraging fact is that school curriculums are geared to a middle class system.

"Instead of educating the disadvantaged, schools merely mirror a world that these youths have learned to reject."⁵

To enrich the background of the deprived student and improve his skills, schools need laboratories, tape recorders, listening posts, records, films, and many books. These are just a few of the needs. But care must be taken not to create a special culture for the culturally deprived.⁶

"The meager background that the poor environment provides helps to account for the low level of aspiration of many individuals who grow up in deprived areas."⁷

Motivation bridges the gap between the child's background experiences and new learning material. Pressure is not enough to motivate the child. He must be helped to want to improve his status. No child is able to make progress or be interested in school activities if he cannot grasp what is expected of him. Motivation of learning is possible only when the teacher understands the thinking level of the learner and stimulates thinking on that level.⁸

The child needs help in setting attainable goals. He will work if he can see his goal. He desperately needs

praise and encouragement. Success or failure of goals tends to influence the level of attainment strived for.

"An individual's self-concept is a syndrome of attitudes and feelings that accompany his awareness of himself as a person together with what he believes himself to be."⁹

This concept develops as he identifies with his family and other people. There are four factors involved in the formation of a self-concept:

- (1) unique biological structure
- (2) gradual accumulation of experience
- (3) relationship with parents or guardian
- (4) perception of success or failure,¹⁰

The lower class child finds it difficult to develop a self-concept that promotes successful, independent behavior. Most of these children bring their frustrations and their warped self-images into the classroom. Here it becomes the teacher's responsibility to help them correct their full potential as human beings.

Teachers point to poor environment, cultural deprivation, and lack of educational stimulation at home as the determinants of low academic achievements in children. They contend that these students should not be expected to function at the level of others because test scores say they cannot. The question arises -- Do the test scores show some immutable level of intelligence or do they simply mirror the deprivations and discriminations which these children suffer?

Studies have shown that the environment has an influence on the measured IQ. This varies for the first to fifth grades.

The IQ of a slum child will usually rank 10-15 IQ points lower than normal.¹¹ These tests require reading ability. The slum environment has placed severe limitations on mental development. The child is not able to recognize objects. He will form distorted ideas and concepts. There is little doubt that the slum child is slower in working academic problems. He needs more examples before he sees the point, draws a conclusion, or forms a concept. He will not jump to conclusions. He is slow in solving problems, getting to work, and taking tests.¹²

Society has lost sight of the IQ as just a score of an individual's rate of learning. It does not determine how much he will learn but it tells the amount of effort it will take.¹³ The culturally deprived child is usually not below average in intelligence. He just has had a poor background. There needs to be an IQ test that is fair to all cultures.

"To teach disadvantaged children effectively is to display the highest professional competence. To help a child achieve the promise born in him, but submerged through no fault of his own, is a noble task."¹⁴

Some preparation for this type of teaching can be done in advance, but most of it stems from actual experience on the scene;

All teachers should have a love for children. This is particularly necessary when working with the culturally deprived. General respect and empathy for each child is compulsory. The teacher also needs to be especially approachable and have a close relationship with her students.

She should be interested and enthusiastic in her work. She must believe that each child is born with potential for learning even though he must overcome great obstacles to develop it. Under proper conditions almost every child is capable of learning.

A teacher of the culturally deprived should have strict control of her emotions. She should be calm, objective, and factful. A sense of fair play is a real asset. Also a teacher needs a sense of security so she will not be upset by outbursts in class -- even those aimed at her. She should take what the child says seriously. If she does not, it will appear as if she does not take him seriously.

A teacher must realize that these children will interpret things out of their poverty mores. They would not be expected to act in a proper way, for they may not be aware of what is proper. The middle class teacher, despite good intentions, often bogs down because she cannot transcend her own value system to meet that of the child. A teacher often encourages a student to succeed on her mores, therefore teaching the child that his values are wrong. This implies that to win favor and reward he must give up his individuality and conform to the group. This causes a loss of identity.¹⁶

An important clue to teaching the disadvantaged is to personalize everything. Teach "my" before "the." The child is not ready for abstract learning. He will learn much more about "my boat" than "the boat."

Perhaps the most important qualification for this type of teaching is first hand knowledge of the patterns of life, value

systems, and motivational outlooks of the disadvantaged child. This would enable the teacher to see education as the child sees it. A teacher can receive this training from observation, practice teaching, and working with the disadvantaged in the community outside of the school.

It is easy to see the problem, but we must not stop here. The public must be made to realize the importance of educating the disadvantaged child with the proper conditions for development.

Evidence should be obtained on each child at the beginning of the first grade to determine the level he has reached. There should be a number of approaches to introductory learning, and the child should be placed in the approach best for him. The teacher staff for at least the first three years should be specially chosen and trained.¹⁷

The relationship between the home and the school needs to be strengthened. The child should be assured of a good breakfast and mid-day meal. If the parents are unable to provide this, the community should handle it in such a way as to not embarrass the child. If parents cannot provide medical examinations, the school should.¹⁸

It is much simpler to just discuss the problem and its possible solutions than to take action on it. However, America has reached the point where something must be done. Education for all is at the heart of the American system. The culturally deprived has a right to a good education. It is not the child's fault that he is not as economically secure as his middle class cohort.

"We must have very clearly in our minds what educational goals we have for these children. Should our goal be that these youngsters learn the important things in life: not to steal, not to hit people over the head, to be able to stand some small frustration and still go on with the task? Or should our goal be that they learn, like Lee Harvey Oswald, to read and write, no matter what."¹⁹

FOOTNOTES

¹Lester D. Crow, Walter I. Murray, and Hugh H. Smyth, Educating the Culturally Disadvantaged Child (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1966), p.3.

²Benjamin S. Bloom, Allison Davis, and Robert Hess, Compensatory Education for Cultural Deprivation (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966), p. 9.

³Lester D. Crow, op. cit., p. 122.

⁴Ibid., p.59.

⁵Ibid., p. 62.

⁶Ibid., p. 59.

⁷Ibid., p. 69.

⁸Ibid., p. 22.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Allan G. Ornstein, "Reaching the Disadvantaged," School and Society, (March 30, 1968), 214-216.

¹¹Charlotte K. Brooks, "School Library or Bookatheque?", The Library Journal, XC(April 15, 1965), 1989-90.

¹²Lester D. Crow, op. cit., p. 62.

¹³Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁵"The Education of Teachers of the Disadvantaged," NEA Journal, LIV(1965), 12,13.

¹⁶Allan G. Ornstein, op. cit., p. 214.

¹⁷Benjamin S. Bloom, op. cit., pp. 24,26.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 10, 11.

¹⁹Bruno Bettelheim and Sonia Shankman, "Teaching the Disadvantaged," NEA Journal, LIV(September, 1965), 8-12.

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